



The Color of Leadership

by Jonathan D. Jansen

On July 1, 2000, I became the first black dean of Education in the almost 100-year existence of the formidable University of Pretoria, South Africa. This essay offers a set of meditations on being a black dean in a white university at the birth of a post-apartheid democracy. There are many sides to this narrative. It is a story of leading in a young democracy and about black leadership in a conservative white environment. It is about the emotions and politics of change. It is about engaging established patterns of certainty and control, and managing the inevitability of loss and change. It is about race, reconciliation, and restitution—all at the same time.

Important to state from the onset is that the so-called South African “miracle” was, in fact, an elite settlement. The political leadership on all sides, especially the black African National Congress of Nelson Mandela (operating from exile) and the white Nationalist Party of Frederick de Klerk, created the conditions for political negotiations and the terms of political settlement. In the years leading to the first democratic elections in 1994, these political elites worked through personal and ideological differences to create the possibility of a relatively nonviolent transition to democracy. Ordinary South Africans, black and white, did not have structured and planned forums through which to negotiate three centuries of colonialism and apartheid. In public spaces, such confrontation on equal terms under the law would, inevitably, create tensions and conflicts through which these ordinary persons would need to work. There was no textbook for what South Africans called “transformation.” How does one lead during this kind of transition? How does one lead on the privileged terrain of white culture and tradition that is so powerfully vested in its institutions? And how does a black dean lead white colleagues in the task of institutional transformation?

Affirmation

The first thing I learned was the importance of creating an open and comfortable space within which South Africans could express themselves. This was difficult given an institutional culture that was hierarchical, rigid, rule-driven, authoritarian, and patriarchal. White colleagues needed to express their concerns and fears about the transition to democracy in their existing work environment. And incoming black colleagues needed to articulate fears and concerns about their new home.

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I had to convey a sense of affirmation of the resident culture to the academic and administrative staff, mainly white. I also had to convey a sense of change and transformation in this white institution that was built by several generations of the Afrikaner elite with substantial privilege and investment from the National Party—the political home of most Afrikaners and the party that won the whites-only election in 1948 on the platform of apartheid.

Affirmation required recognition and acceptance that Afrikaans was the major institutional language. It required me, as a leader, to learn, speak, and improve my rather shaky Afrikaans. As an outsider, appreciating the emotion invested in this language by its primary speakers was difficult. Afrikaans had become, in many ways, the most dominant symbol, culturally and politically, of the collective confidence and social status of white Afrikaners. I knew that to chart transformation at Tukkies (the colloquial name of the University of Pretoria, which previously had been named Transvaal Universiteits Kollege or TUKS), I would have to engage colleagues and pursue transformation through Afrikaans. My initially broken Afrikaans—where the verb typically appears at the end of a sentence—improved, and my confidence in the language grew.

I had to overcome rudiments of my own hostility toward the language. I grew up in a home of black English speakers. My mother, whose home language was Afrikaans, would resort to her mother tongue when she wielded the light branches of the Port Jackson tree on the legs and buttocks of her wayward children: *dis die laaste keer dat ek met julle praat* (this is the last time that I speak with you about this). Of course, it was never the last time, and I suppose that in early childhood I associated Afrikaans with pain.

Then came the Soweto Uprising of 1976, the fatal attempts by the Nationalist Party government to enforce Afrikaans across the curriculum for black students, and the

personal confrontations I had with state officials and with the police—all in the language of the oppressor: Afrikaans. Fortunately, I later met radical black (and white) writers of Afrikaans who convinced me of the broader ownership and literary beauties of this powerful language. The scars remained, however, in the same way that singing the Afrikaans section of the national anthem—a veritable symbol of reconciliation and accommodation—still reminds me of how I was beaten by my primary school principal on Republic Day, May 31 for refusing to hoist the apartheid flag as my fellow learners sang lustily about *die kreun van ossewa* (the burdened sounds of the ox wagons, referring to a time when Afrikaners moved across the land from south to north).

Aside from language, other affirmative actions were required, including the need to convey job security for white academics and administrators, the need to retain some of the Afrikaans art collections and cultural symbols in prominent places, and the need to demonstrate that the black dean was the leader for *all* staff—color apart.

Such a stance was necessary for a number of reasons. First, I did not believe that transformation should be interpreted as the summary displacement of whites and the mindless replacement with black colleagues. This is not only morally questionable, but also politically shortsighted and pedagogically vacuous. With regard to pedagogy, what better way of advancing dialogue on our bitter past than to have symbols of the old and new in coexistence throughout the institution? Second, the broader political environment set the tone for *toenadering* (coming together to meet each other or reconciliation), and the affirmation of white staff members fit well with this sense of national consensus. Third, I knew that one could establish a truly South African community in this institution given the pragmatic politics of my white colleagues and their historical sense of the need to respect governmental authority—of any kind. I went to the University of Pretoria to have a real chance of contributing to the creation of a truly South African institution.

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Staff Integration and Development

In this institutional environment, restitution would have to be the other face of reconciliation. For me, this meant an aggressive search for the leading and most promising black academics in South Africa and around the world. Several factors worked to my advantage. A few white colleagues retired; the university made available resources for “employment equity” appointments over and above the existing post establishment; and the rapid escalation in student numbers created new opportunities for staff recruitment—all enabling me to bring in talented black scholars, most of whom never would have contemplated entering this Afrikaner bastion.

In this context, leadership required a balancing act between affirming the traditional inhabitants of this ecology and bringing in new members. I felt that the only way to alter the institutional culture in the long term was to gradually bring in academics and administrators from the outside, both black and white. I also realized that to retain the traditional student base and talented young white academics, clear signals should be sent that this was a place for all South Africans as well as talented scholars beyond our borders. Changing the diversity profiles of the staff, however, was not enough. Colleagues also needed to be bound to a central commitment.

Though the university's financial status was favorable and managerial ethos was strong, the years of academic isolation under apartheid and its ethnic character had marginalized the University of Pretoria in the academic world. The university lacked intellectual diversity and richness that invariably accompany an open university. Because political loyalties often played a role in key managerial and academic ap-

pointments, intellectual life had suffered a serious toll at the institution. The institution's standards were not very high—especially in the social sciences, humanities, and education.

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I felt that the best way to build loyalties and common bonds among the increasingly diverse academic staff was to develop a comprehensive strategy to increase the university's capacity for research. Each staff member was interviewed and, from this data, a research development plan was compiled. The

first task was to expose the young academics to the leading international thinkers in their field and introduce them to the major educational research conferences. More than any other strategy, this investment in young academics immediately turned around the culture of the faculty and the focus of academic work. From outside the circle of white Afrikaans' universities, prominent scholars were brought into the faculty for periods of time, and a team of leading professors became associated with the university on a contractual basis. Weekly training workshops about research were scheduled, specialty research centers were established, the latest software for advanced data management and analysis were installed, and international conferences were held.

Intellectual isolation and cultural homogeneity were penetrated. New scholars from other institutions approached faculty leaders to inquire about appointment. Graduate students from around the world sought admission for the first time. A new energy seemed to drive both the young and more established academics as the focus shifted toward scholarship and intellectual life.

Building Student Relationships

The most important leadership challenge, however, was among undergraduate students. In 2001, the new government required several universities to incorporate a college of education. The University of Pretoria incorporated the Pretoria College of Education, a small institution comprised mostly of white students and academic staff members. My initial thinking was that these white and mainly Afrikaner young people would be completely disconnected from the horrible past of their parents' generation. Surprisingly, they carried powerful memories and strong positions about race and racial assertion. I found intellectual solace in what Eva Hoffman (2004) perceptively called the "paradox of indirect knowledge," or the ways in which second-generation victims of the Holocaust carry powerful memories of what they themselves have not experienced and act on such knowledge. This was clearly the case with young white students at the University of Pretoria. I realized as a black dean that I had the responsibility—to the institution, to the teaching profession, and to the nation—to serve these students in ways that brought them into the spirit of a new South Africa and a new system of education.

I needed to create a positive and affirming climate for students whose positions were received negatively; these students were treated as children by academics and with contempt by authority. The first initiative was to host weekly lunches served by the dean for groups of first-year students, normally about ten—half of them white and half black. The second initiative was to set rules that applied only to first-year students—such as the freedom to see the dean without an appointment. The third initiative was to create and support opportunities for students to gain optimally from the cultural, sports, and religious facilities on the campus. Because it had its own campus, the Education Department was able to develop an institutional culture that would not be overwhelmed by the nearly 40,000 students on the main campus located four kilometers away. The fourth initiative was to convince academic staff members to change their orientation toward students and make student support initiatives part of the formal evaluation of academics. This concentration of effort on first-year students had a simple logic: win them over, convince them of the value of diversity, and change their discourses about the future. As a result, they would create over the next four years a culture that pervaded the entire institution.

The most difficult remaining challenge was to build bridges between white and black students during the four-year undergraduate program, as well as to attract black high

school students into the teaching profession. Black youths (in contrast to most of their white counterparts) find teaching an unattractive profession. I spend time every month in black schools speaking to young people, and I find that their negativity toward the profession stems from their own school experiences—the deplorable working conditions of teachers, the unpredictable school timetable, and the problems of discipline. Yet, white student teachers would be disadvantaged in their preparation to teach in diverse schools if they did not have opportunities to encounter black students on equal terms. Most white students had no prior contact with black youth. I had to make this engagement possible.

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This was a challenge. As I wrote in *Race, Democracy, and Education* (2004), to expect second-generation South African youths to warmly embrace one another—blind to the accident of skin color—is always going to be unreasonable. Though they started schooling when South Africa was in negotiations to set up a post-apartheid state, they still were potent carriers of Hoffman's (2004) "indirect knowledge."

Young women students at the University of Pretoria typically made the transition toward racial reconciliation more easily than their male counterparts. Fear and concern quickly disappeared as warm friendships and the learning of one another's languages solidified the bonds between white and black. Young men, on the other hand, brought muscularity to their relationships. Anger clearly was evident on both sides. At their request, I met with two groups of young men (a white and a black group) who occupied a residence on the main campus—a residence rich with white traditions, customs, and symbols. The black men recounted stories of alienation, aggression, and the ubiquitous "white glare" which, unless personally experienced, can never be understood in terms of its expression of disdain and its effects of disempowerment. Though these were not education students and they were from another campus, I sensed that such social alienation could be found among male students throughout the institution. The sad truth remains: requiring "racial desegregation" of South African universities has been relatively easy; achieving "social integration" has been much more difficult.

What does this mean for leadership—especially for black leadership in a formerly white institution? With students, role modeling is crucial. Faculty leaders needed to be visible among the students: attending their classes, offering guest lectures, sitting with them during lunch breaks, attending their sports competitions, inviting them to special occasions, and arranging special events to signal leadership's commitment to their interests. Faculty members helped convey a sense of leadership connection with students

when they granted students access to the faculty's special "box" in the rugby stadium, took the first-year class to watch the film *Mona Lisa Smile* or invited students to a dean's *braai* (barbeque), or when faculty leaders attended an evening soccer match to motivate the young men. These overtures made a difference.

One morning around 7:00 a.m., I found a student anxiously waiting for me at the door of my office. The dialogue (in Afrikaans) was:

Dean: *Good morning.*

Student: *Sir, would I be able to see you?*

Dean: *That depends. Are you a first-year student?*

Student: *I am.*

Dean: *Wonderful! Come inside. Tell me about yourself.*

Student: *I am from Lichtenburg (a rural, conservative town about 130 km from Pretoria).*

Dean: *Excellent. How can I help you?*

Student: *Sir, we are very happy with everything you do for us as students. I thought about this last night and decided to come and see you.*

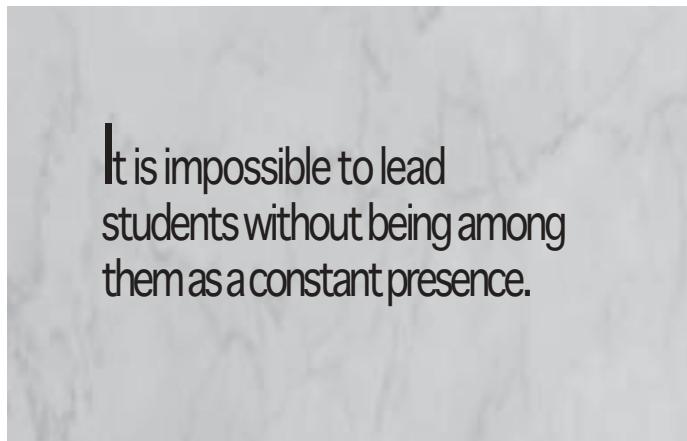
Dean: *Excellent. You are always welcome here, and it is a pleasure to serve you as students. Why do you wish to see me?*

Student: *I was wondering, Sir, if I could pray for you?*

Dean: *Absolutely.*

I was in tears. In any setting, such an encounter would be worth recording. What made this significant was that this young, white, Afrikaner woman from a rural town had walked a greater distance that morning than most people would imagine. She crossed a racial bridge to get to the fourth floor of the Administration building. She crossed a gender bridge in this patriarchal institution. And she, a timid first-year student, crossed an authority bridge to meet the dean. She did not know my religion nor whether I prayed at all. Her visit took enormous courage, and I appreciated the kind gesture.

Countless other episodes with students have impressed upon me the vital importance of leaders affirming and connecting with students and student life. I think it is impossible to lead students without being among them as a constant presence. In these weekly encounters, students teach me about the pace of change, the kinds of things that matter to them, the troubled nature of their own social environments with respect to race and gender, their readiness for change, the ways in which they prefer to respond to "transformation," and the fears and concerns they have about their own identities and those of others.



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The challenge for leadership is to enter this sensitive and volatile terrain with caution. Faculty members must demonstrate in public ways their commitment to all students—black and white. They must spend time in public places with both black and white student groups. When addressing students, they must move between both languages—Afrikaans and English—because black students regard English as the language of fairness even though their home language is likely to be a traditional African language. Faculty members must consciously create opportunities and rewards that recognize both black and white students. They must be visible at sports events associated with black students (soccer) and white students (rugby). Further, all students must be introduced to both white and black teachers and school leaders. I have been particularly concerned that the new appointments include outstanding black academics in physics and mathematics—subjects with distinctive racial histories, politics, and profiles in South Africa. Though intended as political rhetoric, the words of the architect of apartheid education, Minister Hendrik Verwoerd, help illustrate this point and its devastating effects on black South Africans in fields such as science and mathematics: “What is the use of teaching the black man mathematics?”

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None of these achievements would be possible, however, without building shared vision and ownership of the transformation agenda among leaders in the Education faculty. An early task was to create a strong sense of managerial leadership built on a shared public commitment to excellence through diversity among the two school chairs and the seven heads of departments. Weekly meetings, separate from routine management meetings, are held to discuss the “strategic agenda” for transformation. During these strategic agenda

meetings, critical issues, such as the diversity profile of the academic and administrative staff, the curriculum relevance of our offerings, the recruitment of black student teachers, and alliances with national and international partners are discussed. Also in this arena is where succession planning is done and the ongoing renewal of leadership is built.

Final Thoughts

The most common question posed when I conduct training for current and aspiring academic deans within and beyond South Africa is, Where do you find the time to do all these things? The answer is simple. By building a strong team of second- and third-tier managerial leadership and trusting those individuals with clearly defined tasks, I as Dean can attend to broader, strategic leadership matters such as building campus diversity and strengthening international partnerships. If the dean preoccupies himself or

herself with narrow managerial and administrative tasks, the cost is huge in terms of broader strategic and positioning functions that have become increasingly crucial in a globalizing world.

A question seldom posed in discussing leadership is, Why would anyone feel compelled to follow a person? Why would colleagues believe that the new leader, especially a racial and cultural outsider, would act any differently from his or her predecessors and, in the context of a democratic transition, care about the welfare of white staff? Why would black staff members believe that a leader would recognize their dilemmas and struggles within a powerful white institution in which they remain a racial minority despite being a racial majority outside the school? As a leader in such contexts, I believe that there are limits to policy pronouncements and affirming words. In the end, what counts is what you do—it is the most powerful witness of leadership.

I have tried to convey in this article the serious tensions in a leader's actual experiences in nonrevolutionary or negotiated transitions. These include tensions between accommodation and assertion, inclusion and correction, affirmation and (at times) anger, and racial reconciliation and social justice remain.

Leadership in such contexts is as much a spiritual connection to the hearts of people as it is a managerial concern about professional performance. Leadership is about doing what is unexpected and what is difficult. It is impossible to "go up" within any organization unless the leader is prepared to "get down." I found encouragement in Jim Collins's remarkable book *Good to Great* (2001), in which leaders who made a difference demonstrated two qualities: a clear sense of moral purpose and a deep sense of personal humility. In this regard, the South African transition to democracy in education and in other spheres of human endeavor can only succeed through the textbook of our lives as leaders. There is still too much pain for this to be otherwise.

References

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